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Ukraine war: Putin is dangerous, but China is the West's real enemy

Putin sees his assault on Ukraine as part of a wider war for a multipolar world, but his 'alternative model' is failing. China is the only real rival to Western dominance, and that's what America and the West should worry about

David Rosenberg | Mar. 13, 2022 | 12:38 PM | 10

The images of burning buildings, columns of tanks and fleeing refugees we have been witness to since Russia invaded Ukraine can't help but leave the impression that Russia is a serious threat to the world order. And, if that isn't enough, its president, Vladimir Putin, has reminded a world that has memory-holed the danger of Armageddon since the end of the Cold War that he has a nuclear arsenal.

It would be a fool's errand to predict how Putin's Ukraine adventure will end, but there are reasonably good odds that he will get much of what he wants, if not all: If not the actual annexation of all or part of Ukraine, then at least the installation of a friendly government committed to remaining outside of NATO and the European Union.

Then what? That is the key issue. If sanctions are then lifted, and the economy and military rehabilitated, does Russia rise to the rank of a world power anywhere even close to that of the United States? Can Putin realize his dream of creating a multipolar world, or perhaps a bipolar world of the democratic West versus an alliance of various kinds of non-democracies? Do Putin's tactics of disruption and his blatant defiance of what had been regarded as the Western-led global order spell the end of that order?

I don't think any of these outcomes are in the cards, and here is why.

Let's start with the immediate impact of a Ukrainian invasion and occupation that accomplishes most of what Putin is supposed to want. We will take it a step further and assume that his aggressive policies successfully intimidate many of the countries that once belonged to the Soviet Union (that Putin longs for so intensely) and they move closer to the Russian axis.

In terms of raw power politics that does not add up to much. At the peak of the Cold War, it was not unreasonable to divide the world into three – the first world of liberal, capitalist democracies mostly of the West; the second world of the Soviet eastern bloc; and the third world of supposedly non-aligned powers.

The first two worlds had roughly equal military power, albeit never tested in a real war. But economically the USSR's gross domestic product per capita was well under half America's by the time Communism collapsed. The eastern bloc couldn't begin to compete with the West in terms of technological innovation and economic efficiency.

Today, the gap between the U.S. and Russia is even wider. Russia's per capita GDP is 14 percent of America's, its natural resources-based economy more resembles a third world kleptocracy than a developed one and it has just 40 percent of the U.S. population.

The Russian army looks tough on TV, but it doesn't have the human, technological or financial resources to match those of the U.S., much less the U.S. plus its allies. Little more than two weeks of war have shown us how limited and poorly maintained raw Russian military power is and how easily its economy can be undone by sanctions.

Conquering Ukraine wouldn't fundamentally change that balance. Instead of accounting for 3.1 percent of the world economy, together the two would account for 3.25 percent – and probably less, now that Russia has destroyed so much infrastructure and forced many Ukrainian refugees over the border. Ukraine will suffer even more, as will Russia, from lost ties to the West.

On paper, Putin will have gained an additional 41 million new "citizens" to the 144 million in Russia itself and have acquired 603,000 square kilometers of real estate, but that won't restore Russia's former Soviet glory.

Perhaps Putin fully understands Russia's fundamental weakness and he is gambling that he can bluster his way into convincing the world otherwise. However, there are very strong indications that with Putin it's not just bluster, and that he believes that global competition isn't just about economic power but, as he stated in a 2012 speech, "the will of each nation, its internal energy and ability to move forward and change."

That speech – the Russian equivalent of the U.S. State of the Union address – also contains calls for democracy, freedom and economic development. But a decade later, we can look back and say with certainty that those weren't Putin's real priorities. Rather, it is the country's "national and spiritual identity, its sense of national unity" as well as "civil responsibility and patriotism" (read: obedience to the state and irredentist nationalism) that is a "consolidating force behind Russian politics."

The worldview Putin expressed in that address isn't the first to challenge the political and economic model that has developed in the West over the last two centuries, which is built on democracy, individual rights, free markets and a preference for science and reason over political and religious ideology. No

one would argue that the system has delivered quite a few benefits, most obviously in raising standards of living and fostering innovation while giving human beings unprecedented personal autonomy.

But it failed in other ways: Karl Marx was correct in noting how industrial capitalism (and I might add its outgrowths in the form of consumerism and mass media) is alienating. People want to feel they are part of something greater than themselves, whether it was a tribe in the past or a nation in the present day. They don't prize autonomy so much when it leaves them feeling alone, exploited and isolated without some sense of belonging to something bigger whether it's tribe, religious faith, nation or social class.

Over the last 150 years or so, various alternatives have been proffered, starting with Marxist communism (which assumed it could create a society based on class solidarity) followed by fascism (which thought it could do the same through authoritarian nationalism). With its vision of a society united by its adherence to Muslim values and membership in the *ummah*, Islamism was another manifestation.

They all failed in part because they couldn't begin to marshal the economic and technological resources of Western liberal capitalism. The communist alternative was by far the most serious competitor of them all because it offered a collective society that anyone (at least anyone who was a worker) could aspire to join. Communist economics was a failure; its real appeal was its collectivist vision of a society united and heading towards a brilliant future.

Putin is putting this collectivist, non-material vision to the test. He is pitting the will of the Russian people and Russian troops against the economic and financial power of the West. He might regard it as a "victory" if Russia withstands the sanctions regime by muddling through by creating an economic autarky isolated from the global economy. This is certainly how Iran's leaders see their war with the West and the "resistance economy" that they have erected. But that kind of victory isn't going to get him very far.

Iran, Russia and their motley crew of global allies in the war against Western domination don't amount to a pole worthy of a multipolar world. Their various models are abject failures and, in any case, don't offer a real model for others who might be lured by it. Unlike Mao's China or Mussolini's Italy, neither the Kim family's North Korea nor Nicolas Maduro's Venezuela offer a compelling vision.

Putin's nationalism doesn't resonate outside of Russia – not even in the Slavic world, as the Ukrainians have been showing him. Russia has neither the economic power nor a compelling ideology on which it can build an

alternative pole to the West. Like Iran or North Korea, it is a big nuisance that must be contained but it is not an existential threat.

The one real challenge to Western dominance comes from China, and that is the rival America and the West should be worrying about. The Chinese challenge doesn't make such good television, nor does it raise the moral hackles of the world as Russia has, because it eschews the showy Putin's aggressiveness.

But China is much more dangerous because for much of the last three decades it has abandoned the collectivist vision in all but name in favor of capitalist one – not a liberal capitalism but a *sui generis* mix of free market economics combined and efficient, goal-directed government.

In this century, its model has stood several tests as the West struggled with mixed success with the Great Financial Crisis, political logjams created by domestic ideological warfare and the COVID pandemic.

But, ironically, just as China's moment may have arrived, it seems that its leader, Xi Jinping, seems intent on destroying everything that has made China great. His clampdown on the limited freedoms Chinese enjoyed and on entrepreneurs and his intense nationalism will almost certainly have the effect of weakening China in the name of trying to strengthen it.

But that will take time. In the meantime, China remains the West's only real rival. If Beijing ever tries to pull a Ukraine on Taiwan, that's when we'll be facing a true contest of equals, and a correspondingly catastrophic disaster.